

# **Historic and Modern-Day Azerbaijani-Greek Cultural Relations, Challenges and Suggestions**

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Alfred Nobel once said that, without exaggeration, the observation of and the search for similarities and differences are the basis of all human knowledge. In fact, it is as basic as that – sometimes it is exactly those differences that bring people together, while other times lack of similarities push them away. At the end of the day, it is a personal matter for every single human being, whether having the same taste and likes is what he/she needs to be happy, or trying everything new every day is. Hence, it is not only about the people – the same ideology could be applied to food, culture, nature, music, etc. Some of us like exploring new horizons in every trip of ours, while the rest of us prefer a more tranquil and familiar setting of vacation. Thus, it becomes a major variable as we narrow down our summer destinations every year. For those, who are more lenient towards a traditional atmosphere, it is no surprise Greece has become a hub for popular summer trips, as the country has at least one thing in common with every new tourist – be it the perky music, old and history-smelling rustic buildings, hospitable locals – this ancient country welcomes its guests with a scent of nativity, and sees them off with newly gained experiences. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is also a cradle of civilization and ancient histories, where every stone has a story to share, yet also has this mysterious

sense to it. In one sense, the country is nothing similar to Greece, yet on another, it is extremely alike. If differences lie between how well known these countries are or by how many folds their economy has increased/decreased over the past couple years, the similarities are to be found in the warmth of their nationals, in the flavor of their cuisines or just that playful tune of their songs. The essence of this paper is not to emphasize on the differences and similarities Azerbaijan and Greece have, but rather to study how these countries have managed to develop the political and civil partnerships and friendship over the years. It will also shed light on increasing these ties even more, specifically in tourism sector.

Azerbaijan, a rather small country, with area of 86.6 km<sup>2</sup> and home to 9.5 million people, according to the 2014 population census by the World Bank, is one of the 15 countries gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite the fact that majority of the population – around 93% - practices Islam as their religion, the country is well known for its tolerance towards other practices and customs (Islamawareness). One can stumble upon a Jewish synagogue, a Russian Orthodox Church or see Catholics freely celebrating the birth of Jesus just on one stroll across the capital city of Baku, where cultural differences are nothing, but welcome and part of the daily life. Usually referred to as an oil-rich country, Azerbaijan has managed to increase its economy multiple folds since the very first days of its independence. The economical development skyrocketed in early 2000s, mainly in 2006 and after a period of constant falls went back to having small, but steady increases (World Bank). As a result, income of the population during January-July period of 2015 has increased by 6.4%, compared to

the same period of the previous years, making it reach 354 Azerbaijani Manats (around 295 Euros) per month (State Statistical Committee). This growth also shows itself in the country's appearance in the international arena, as it steps in hosting various cultural and sports events. In 2012, for instance, Azerbaijan became the host for Eurovision - the biggest song contest in Europe. The country not only managed to build all the venues and facilities needed for the contest, but also organized the event to its best. Three years later, in June 2015, Baku once more attracted all the international eyes hosting the first European Olympic Games in the history. Around 6000 athletes representing 50 countries, including Greece, competed in 20 sports. Upon successful completion of the project, Azerbaijan won the honor of hosting European Grand Prix Formula One (F1) race in 2016 (CNN). All these major events taking place in the country, without any doubt, attract hundreds and thousands of tourists to see the beautiful land with their own eyes. If just a few years ago a national of the country struggled to find exact words and location to precisely describe his/her country during a travel abroad, now the name Azerbaijan does not need further explanation, for its roaring fame from the East to the West.

Strategically located on the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, Greece is the cradle of civilizations, customs and traditions. There is no way to leave the country out when speaking of the mighty European Empires like the Ottomans, Byzantine or Roman. Whether the country was conquered or gained independence, it played an important role in the history of each of these Empires. It should not come as a surprise that, in her book "The Illustrated Timeline of Western Literature: A Crash Course in Words and Pictures" Carol Strickland, a well-known American art historian, calls Greece "the birthplace of

democracy, Western philosophy, the Olympic Games and Western literature” (Strickland). Sure enough, one cannot deny the mysterious feeling whistling through the ruins of the ancient city, Acropolis or the Syntagma Square. Unfortunately, Greece has undergone a decline in economic growth over the past couple years – 5.4% decline in 2010, 8.9% in 2011, 6.6% in 2012 and 3.9% in 2013- affecting not only its economy, but to all the countries in the European Union (World Bank). On the other hand, fortunately enough, Greece is still the main summer vacation destination for millions of people from all over the world. Based on the data provided by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs 24.5 million tourists arrived in Greece in simply 2014, which in its turn contributed to 18% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, this number was rambling around 15 million people just 4 years ago, in 2010. Tourism industry employs around 900, 000 people, which accounts for one fifth of the country’s workforce (MFA-Greece).

Historic and cultural similarities between Azerbaijan and Greece have always brought these two countries to cooperate together. One can trace these relations to as far as the Ag Goyunlu Dynasty, when Sultan Uzun Hassan married Greek princess Despina khatun (Zeno et al). Their daughter Halima later married Haydar Safavi Sultan and became the mother of Shah Ismail of the Safavids – not only a mighty emperor and shah, but also a prolific poet, who under the pen name of Khatai, contributed greatly to the development of the literature in the Azerbaijani language (Doerfer). Years later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on December 31, 1991, Greece became one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan’s independence from the Soviet Union. One year later Greek-Azerbaijani diplomatic relations was established and in the spring of 1993 Greek

Embassy was opened in Baku. Despite these growing relations, it was not until April 2004 that Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Athens.

Today the cooperation and partnership between Azerbaijan and Greece are multidirectional – the countries have bilateral agreements on both political and commercial levels. Between 1994-2004 a number of projects were signed between the two countries in the economic, industrial, technological, scientific, educational, cultural and tourism fields. Consequently, on December 2, 2000 the Parliament of Azerbaijan established the Azerbaijan-Greece Interparliamentary Friendship Group (MFA-Azerbaijan). There was also an Azerbaijani-Greek Business Forum held in Athens in February 2009, devoted to the opportunities of business cooperation (Aliyevheritage). These relations were especially boosted after the visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to Greece in 2009, where he met his Greek counterpart Karolos Papoulias and the Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis (Southeast Europe Times). These meetings played important role as the countries agreed to partner on global oil projects when Azerbaijan decided to deliver its natural oil and gas to Europe through Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) which would pass through Greece, Albania and Italy (Seenews) and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), with one branch of the pipeline passing through Greece after Turkey (Aghayev).

The Hellenic Republic of Greece was among the countries Azerbaijan signed agreements on cooperation in tourism sphere, after becoming a member of the Universal Tourism Organization (UTO) in 2001. In the same year Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture

and Tourism held an International Conference on “Tourism Opportunities in the OECBS<sup>1</sup> Region”, where the deputy-ministers of tourism of member states discussed possible tourism opportunities in the region. During the conference Greece was one of the countries Azerbaijan established intensive relations with the state tourism entities (Embassyaz).

Couple years later, two foreign ministers - Dimitris Avramopoulos of Greece and Elmar Mammadyarov of Azerbaijan – discussed possible cooperation in tourism sector in a meeting in New York City (Society). Which is why, today the growing number of Azerbaijani tourists visiting Greece and vice-versa should not seem surprising to anyone at all. Just in 2011, more than 225 000 Azerbaijanis visited Greece, mainly the island of Santorini – the pearl of the Cycladic islands group.

During his interview to the Azerbaijani Press Agency in 2013, Greek Foreign Minister Avramopoulos said that before taking over the six-month rotating Presidency of the European Union, one of the priorities of Greece was working on developing the ties and cooperation with other countries. Azerbaijan, having conducted an aggressive ad campaigns to lure tourists at the same period with the interview, was among the countries Greece was looking forward to work with. According to the minister’s words, compared to the ongoing efforts to promote tourism sector in Greece over the past 60 years, Azerbaijan was fairly new to the process, however, that would not be a barrier for partnerships (Greekreporter). A month from the interview Aegean Airlines would be

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<sup>1</sup> OECBS – Organization of Economic Cooperation of the Black Sea

opening direct flights from Athens to Baku, which unfortunately due to many reasons did not end up being a successful project and was cancelled after a short period of operation, despite the efforts of the Greek MFA to make visa procedures easier for Azerbaijani citizens (Euronews).

One year later, in the summer of 2014, direct flights connections between Baku and Rhodes were opened. These flights, operating from mid June through mid September were considered to be charter flights performed by Greek air carrier Aegean Airlines. In the beginning there was only one flight per week – on Wednesdays – however, later demand made it essential to add a second flight to operate on Fridays (ABC). In just three months hundreds of Azerbaijanis flew to the Greek resort island and visited other islands, as well as, the capital city of Athens while on the trip. This project was considered to be more successful than Baku-Athens-Baku flight that was launched in 2013, in terms of being much cheaper, as well as, more profitable. However, this year, the charter flight faced with huge problems and was ceased to exist. Among many issues listed, three main ones were said to be new terms for obtaining a Greek visa, financial crisis in Greek banks, and also low demand for Rhodes among the local people. According to the tourism agencies in Baku, the latter could be avoided if the flights were announced earlier: “The decision of re-opening a charter flight was announced in mid June, which is extremely late, since most people start making summer plans as early as March” (Banco). Logically, the closer it gets to summer, the more expensive the travel packages become and very few percentage of people are willing to sacrifice their long-term savings for the sake of one week’s vacation.

Despite these failed flight attempts between Baku and Greek cities and islands, there are still high chances to re-establish them on right terms. Paying closer attention to the reasons of failures, one can easily observe the gaps and somewhat irresponsibility in the management process. Unfortunately (or fortunately, on a second thought), most of them are not the issues the heads of the governments should sit down to discuss, but rather could be solved in lower levels of governance. An upfront step should be easing the visa procedures for the tourists – requiring less documents for people having a rather shorter trips and making it possible to obtain a visa as quickly as in 2 days. Even though a standard visa rate applies for all Schengen member states, it might be worth considering the option of providing tourists with a single entry, 1 or 2-week visa, if a trip to a second Euro-Zone state is out of picture. As a second step, having a strong team of experts work on analyzing the supply and demand for Greek and Azerbaijani tourists in both countries and handling the matters from there on would be an effective addition to the process. This team of experts could work with local tourism agencies to define what kind of sites, attractions and tours people usually are interested in each of these two countries, in order to better be able to come up with travel packages. Attracting more agencies to cooperate would be also a positive nuance, since bigger competition would mean cheaper prices, which would cause an increase in the number of the tourists. As a final step, there could be more airlines operating charter flights between Baku and Greek islands or Athens, for people with different needs. For instance, cheaper flights could be established through low-cost airline companies, such as, Ryanair or Wizzair for people willing to pay less and

fly with less baggage. And for those in demand of a more comfortable and flexible flight, Azerbaijani Airlines or Aegean Airlines could offer a bit pricier seats.

Working on a “feasibility study” on how to develop the touristic ties between Azerbaijan and Greece, it is essential that other areas of cultural partnerships are also paid attention to and developed. Because one way of increasing the touristic inflow is strengthening the friendship relations between the two nations. Ministries of Culture, Education, Youth and Sport on both sides have done incredible work towards this goal over the years. A great example to this would be the partnerships between the Azerbaijani and Greek universities nowadays. Currently Greek language is being taught at Baku Slavic University, where the Greek President Constantinos Stephanopoulos was awarded the title of the Honorary Doctor, when he visited the university to participate at the opening ceremony of the Center of Modern Greek Language and Art in 2004 (Aliyevheritage). Thanks to this center and the Education, Religion, Culture and Sport Ministry of Greece, today Azerbaijani students are able to participate at the Greek language and culture courses every summer. Starting from 2013 Baku State University and Thessaloniki Aristotle University have also implemented a number of joint projects (MFA-Azerbaijan). Also, in the same year Hellenic-Azerbaijani youth Center was established in Athens. Besides these, within the period of 2010-2014 9 jazz, classic and popular concerts have been organized by the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Greece. Even though the main purpose of these events has been to promote Azerbaijani culture and music in Greece, they have also played important role in strengthening bilateral relations (MFA-Azerbaijan).

It becomes a hard task to establish cultural relations between states that have nothing in common except politics, and it gets even harder to maintain and develop them smoothly. Fortunately, this is far from being a problem for Azerbaijan and Greece, for all the historic ties and cultural similarities the nations of these two states share. History has been made; relations have been built; now all that remains is to preserve them and do everything possible to take them to the next level every coming year. And that should be a task for every one citizen of both countries, for the historic and cultural ties between Azerbaijan and Greece are too precious of a heritage to be lost to centuries.

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